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The Incubator and the Interregnum: Theorizing the (Work)Places of Class Struggle

by Sarah Earnshaw | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Labor landscapes of post-Fordism are commonly characterized by fragmentation, fracture, and atomization, with platformization as the latest abstraction of a workplace that is everywhere and nowhere. The period following the 2008 financial crash has been posed as an interregnum where the exposed contradictions of neoliberalism have not yet ousted this order, while multiple actors jostle to grasp the reins. In this paper, I propose a focus on the cultural practices of place-making in theorizing contemporary class struggle with reference to two groups of digital laborers: tech workers and online sex workers. Taking the incubator—a place of pooled resources for companies in-the-making—as a jumping off point, I consider the interrelations, differentials, and potentials for class (re)composition when the distinction of work from life is as blurred as it is distinguishing. From an autonomist perspective and looking to collectives such as the Tech Workers Coalition and Hacking//Hustling, I unpick the "common sense" of a placeless platformed capital to explore the multiplicity of the "workplace," what counts as "work," and which places enable the imagination of otherwise. As visions of the "future of work" abound I ask, how can research under the umbrella of cultural studies support and co-create points of intervention—places of aggregation—in the interregnum?

KEYWORDS Autonomist Marxism, class, interregnum, labor, sex work, technology

Introduction

Incubators are everywhere: on university and tech campuses, in fields from architecture and art to AI and crypto, even Taco Bell launched an Internal

Incubator in 2021 that seeks to add “restless creativity” to the “pursuit of positive disruption.”[1] Business incubators come in a variety of forms with diverse funding sources and host institutions but, as the name suggests, are characterized by providing conditions—namely office space, infrastructure, training, and connections—to nurture the growth of early-stage ventures, protected from external risks until they can strike out on their own.[2] In the tech startup ecosystem, incubators are one facilitator of speculative investment in budding entrepreneurs whose innovation might go on to disrupt industry giants (or at least to be acquired by one), part of the mythic Silicon Valley journey from DIY project in the garage to millionaire founder. Particularly following the global lockdowns at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the stakes of reimagining the future of work in hybrid forms and with flexible workers often refer to creating a workplace that is an incubator of culture, creativity, and innovation. What common-sense assumptions about contemporary work—about what work is and where it can take place—are articulated by the incubator as a model and a metaphor? The labor landscapes of post-Fordism are commonly characterized by fragmentation, fracture, and atomization; platformization is the latest abstraction of a workplace that is everywhere and nowhere. This article proposes a focus on cultural practices of place-making to interrogate the multiplicity of the workplace and distinctions inscribed in and through place with reference to two groups of digital laborers: tech workers and online sex workers. Thinking the incubator with the interregnum is a prompt to reflect on how research generally, and cultural studies particularly, can emphasize antagonisms in contemporary labor and ultimately co-create places of protection and care to strengthen workers in the struggle over an uncertain future. As sex worker and writer Tamara MacLeod argues, “it is important to consider both *why* and *what* we consider ‘the workplace’, because *where* one works—especially for a sex worker—is vital to thinking about liberty.”[3]

Posing the “incubator” as a jumping-off point speaks to three entwined scales through which to approach contemporary class composition: Firstly, the incubator is a node in the tech startup landscape of innovation, populated by and

constitutive of the entrepreneurial self, as one of the "legible emblems" celebrated in the "transnational cultures that orient toward Silicon Valley for models of social change."[4] Secondly, the incubator is a lens through which to center social reproduction in class analysis and consider the liberatory potentials of technology, when not in service of capital. I take a cue here from the Feminist Architecture Collaborative's (also known as F-Architecture) idea of the incubator incubator. In thinking through the ongoing undervaluation of feminized labor across the reimagined office, they "lingered on a concept that might someday manifest the greatest ambitions of flexible work: the premium accommodation of a shambles (our soft bods, or a business-in-formation)."[5] Facing the ambiguities of contemporary capitalism, how might such a "perversion of incubation" inform a reimagined workplace to support both creative practice as well as the messy corporeality of living? Finally, the interregnum is an "incubational moment," which Homi Bhabha describes as converging the traces of past unfinished struggles to hopes and fears for the future in an emerging present, which is "without guarantees."[6]

Working within the interregnum seeks to understand the contours of a period of crisis and uncertainty while in the throws, to intervene within it. Widening inequality, the disintegration of social safety nets and privatization of public infrastructure, and rising debt alongside a dearth of stable employment have marked the post-2008 era, with the COVID-19 pandemic deepening the crises of care.[7] This period also saw the rise of platforms and consolidation of the power of Big Tech; there are few spheres of labor in this period, or indeed of life, that are not related to platforms. Data infrastructures present a seemingly placeless plane of unfettered access, the cloud as an almost-ethereal structure mediating everyday online practices across email servers, storage, data analysis, and software development.[8] While critique largely focuses upon privacy concerns in the accumulation and sale of data, extension of surveillance, and depressing/deskilling workers, the Institute for Technology in the Public Interest call for greater attention to data infrastructures as "financialising literally

everything on a rentable model, thereby indenting institutions, communities, and individuals to their values and services" wherein Big Tech "capture[s] imagination for what a public is, and what is in its interest."[9] Analyzing labors and workplaces often left out of the frame, between perceived prestige or patronization, I outline an autonomist-Marxist informed cultural studies to seek points of commonality, without collapsing into a class monolith.

I approach class struggle through the lens of place, described by Tim Cresswell as "a gathering of materialities, meanings, and practices," as a through-line to think together—while holding in tension—seemingly disparate phenomena in contesting the spatial valuation of work.[10] The paper aims to highlight the relevance of an autonomist class compositional perspective and the politics of place for activist scholarship attendant to the interregnum. I draw upon worker-centered militant research, examples from platforms used daily, as well as media and design discourse on the workplaces of digital labor, but this is predominantly an exploratory theoretical piece charting connections, intersections, and tensions across contemporary class relations. I do not have a populated workplace as case: neither a specific tech startup nor platform for online sex work. Taking the workplace as abstraction to study the interregnum, I unpick the "common sense" of a placeless digital capital through a material interrogation of cultural formations that situate work anywhere, in a compositional analysis that contends with differentiations of workers, on- and offline, in and beyond the workplace.

The workplace performs a powerful function in the legal, cultural, and social ordering of US labor, also serving as a linchpin in the imaginary of class politics. In the most direct sense, the already scant employment protections are tied to the bounded worksite in the temporal limits of the shift: a situation that always excluded many but is increasingly at odds with everyday employment. As Heather Berg argues in relation to porn workers, the blurred boundaries of work/non-work surely have negative effects, yet far from pure pessimism, this blurring has been an appeal, for "if porn work is everywhere, it is also nowhere, because many

workers come to porn in search of a job that feels much less like work"; a question most attuned to the interregnum flips the focus, to ask "how might we construct alternatives—life/workplaces built for workers, not capital?"[11] Approaching shifts in capital's spatial organization from the perspectives of tech and sex worker organizing speaks to distinct but related complexities in digital work across flexibility, autonomy, precarity, and exploitation. Articulating points of inquiry for cultural studies in this interregnum, across groups not often thought in tandem, the paper is structured across the binary of everywhere/nowhere, not only to dig into the dialectics of fluidity and enclosure, but to explore creative strategies of workers within the ambivalence of "anywhere." But first, let's turn to the interregnum and the theorizing of class struggle in formation.

The Interregnum: Morbid Symptoms and Militant Research

Antonio Gramsci's "interregnum" is found in an oft-quoted *Prison Notebooks* passage detailing the "crisis of authority" wherein the ruling class have lost consensus necessary for hegemony, with no successor in place: "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[12] As the old order wanes, this is not disorder, rather what Rune Stahl calls a "semiordered system," "characterized by the dysfunction of central institutions that previously kept economic and political contradictions in check; but as long as several viable political and economic strategies exist there is no necessary drive towards a solution."[13] While markedly distinct from 1930s Europe, post-2008 has witnessed a global rise of movements of both Left and Right while neoliberal austerity politics attempt to retain dominance.[14] One could add the current of tech solutionism to the mix, a belief that social problems have a technical fix, that has

sustained and projected the reach of Silicon Valley and, as I note below, become an organizing counterpoint in stirring tech labor movements.[15]

I am drawn to Jeremy Gilbert's reading of the present conjuncture as a dynamic, mutually-reinforcing relation of two processes: the "overall change to the techno-social organization of capitalism" in platform capitalism, and the decline of consensus among the neoliberal political class after the 2008 crash.[16] As Steven Vallas and Juliet Schor argue, the growth of platform economies "coincided with the Great Recession, which facilitated the companies' expansion by creating a ready pool of workers, especially among recent graduates, who could be matched with value-seeking consumers."[17] Before delving into the theory and practice of interregna inquiry, I want to linger upon a morbid symptom in the regulation of the platform economy. Morbid symptoms arise in attempts to manage tensions and contradictions in the loss of hegemony and this brief example is intended to underline the analytical force in studying the overdetermination of crises for scholarly intervention attendant to material and contextual experience.

The passing of the FOSTA-SESTA acts in 2018 is thus far the first substantial change to Section 230 of the US 1996 Communications Decency Act, widely regarded as the bedrock upon which the Internet as we know it functions. Essentially, service providers and platforms are protected from legal liability regarding content published by users as well as in the moderation of that content in enforcing community standards.[18] Both sides of the aisle have argued for reform for different reasons: Republicans largely charge platforms with the over-censorship of conservative views, while Democrats perceive a lack of moderation with the spread of mis-/disinformation (a debate that became particularly heated in the wake of the January 2021 riot at the US Capitol, another morbid symptom).[19] Attempts to wrest power from Big Tech speak to shifting political and cultural terrain, but the legislative response to these debates ultimately added a new spin to a well-worn moral panic. FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) became

law in April 2018 and, as the names make clear, are pitched as anti-trafficking legislation, a topic securing bi-partisan support.

The opening section of FOSTA-SESTA includes the dangerous conflation of trafficking with prostitution, noting that Section 230 was never intended to "provide legal protection to websites that unlawfully promote and facilitate prostitution and websites that facilitate traffickers."[20] A star-studded PSA for the acts speaks to the whorephobic assumptions undergirding policy and weaponised morality in regulating cyberspace.[21] It opens with comedian Amy Schumer making light of the form but assuring the viewer "this is really messed up," as she claims that today you can go online and buy a child for sex, "it's as easy as ordering a pizza."[22] Section 230 is implicitly referred to as the "stupid loophole" which enables this "dark side of technology" to remain legal.[23] A montage tells us to #ListenToSurvivors under soaring music, but of course lawmakers did not listen to sex workers who warned of further harm with little impact on trafficking; the discursive stage was set with sex workers as either victim in an exceptional crisis or deviant.[24] The far-reaching remit prompted the wholesale shutdown of online forums as companies feared legal liabilities, whether mediators for the sale of sexual services or hosting content that could be construed as "promoting" or "facilitating" prostitution, which erased and censored harm reduction content, educational material, and art while furthering discrimination of those on the margins.[25] In their more than five years of operation, there has been little evidence of the acts having curbed sex-trafficking, but due to US centrality in digital infrastructure there are global impacts, even where sex work is legal or decriminalized.[26] In the incubational moment, I propose a theoretical framework which seeks to think beyond the workplace and wage relation, center class subjectivities in the contingent struggle of the moment, and co-create places for the imagination and organization of otherwise.

Theorizing the Interregnum

I place an autonomist Marxist lens on the complementary material analysis of culture in conjunctural analysis. These theoretical standpoints share several convergences as both chart a course between abstract theorizing, subject to determinism, and particularism, that fails to situate phenomena within the wider "social totality" or historical moment. Cultural studies is suited to working in the interregnum precisely through attending to culture as the "general social domain of meaning-making," wherein strategies to coalesce the governing "common sense" renders culture simultaneously a crucial site of "normalisation" as well as "contestation."[27] This scale of analysis aims to map the multiple sites not only where orders are imposed but also countered, hacked, and rearticulated. Stuart Hall described conjuncture as "a period during which the different social, political, economic, and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape"; it is only by unpicking these layers to deconstruct the "whole set of understandings which structure institutional life, the economy, everyday thinking, common sense" that one can "intervene effectively in a radical or decisive way."[28] Conjunctural analysis is characterized by an attention to historical contingency in the conditions of possibility of present power relations alongside a partisan perspective focused upon the ongoing processes of struggle.

Autonomist Marxism is similarly tied to a crisis of Leftist politics—particularly Italian communism—emerging in the late '50s, as Leftist parties had abandoned the working class as revolutionary subject and the factory as site of radical action. In response, militant researchers sought to understand and intervene in struggles across distinct workplaces, student movements, the home, and city-level mass community activism, the first phase popularly understood as ending in the '80s amidst state suppression and defeat of the FIAT factory workers.[29] Poised to grapple with the new that cannot be born yet, Alberto Toscana notes the theorists

"tried to anticipate material transformations and spur political strategies" while being "forced to reckon with changes in the political terrain they had not entirely fathomed."[30] Autonomist methods of inquiry have inspired action-oriented research to chart and organize contemporary class struggle; I want to acknowledge the pivotal work of collectives such as Precarias a la Deriva, Notes from Below, and the Angry Workers of the World.[31]

The hallmark of autonomist thought is Mario Tronti's "Copernican turn" in the dialectical relation, the working class driving capitalist development as opposed to merely reacting.[32] The immanence of struggle is at the heart of class compositional analysis, which charts the dynamic relation between "technical" and "political" composition. The former refers to capital's organization of the labor process toward the ends of accumulation through technology, management techniques, and spatial planning, to inscribe physical and social barriers across workers. Crucially, this is not only at the level of production but also refers to the devaluation and control of unpaid, unwaged, and informal work. Political composition on the other hand, denotes the organizational practices of workers that constitute a collective force to overcome divisions and create a unified base of struggle.[33] Capital seeks to decompose working class solidarity and disperse autonomy—changing the technical arrangement—thus spurring new practices of recomposition. The tools of militant inquiry and co-research (*conricerca*) place research in service of struggle to "map the continuing imposition of the class relation, not as a disinterested investigation, but rather to deepen and intensify social and political antagonisms."[34] This distinctly spatial approach to class analysis reads multiple places of politics at the sites of production, social reproduction, and sociality, accounting for distinct forms of autonomy therein, forming "concrete strategies for connecting this terrain with other spheres which could appear separate."[35]

The US autonomist journal *Zerowork* detailed the interconnected scales, where working class autonomy is understood in relation to capital and "official" organs of

worker representation such as unions or political parties, as well as other sectors of workers. This last point refers to the "differences in power to struggle and organize" through divisions produced by capital and often reproduced in Leftist thought, as in the distinction between the waged and unwaged.[36] Feminist and women-led autonomist movements most cogently developed such distinctions, for instance across the urban framework as documented in Lotta Continua's 1974 *Take Over the City*, which flips the traditional script of class mobilization in the rallying cry "let's carry the message of the rent strike into the factories."[37] Connecting antagonisms across housing, schools, food, and transport infrastructure, the wage was rejected as a sufficient vector of struggle when inflation and property speculation dissipated these gains, a perspective that seems depressingly relevant. Challenging the spatial orders of capital that define where work begins and ends, gendered biases reproduced in containing struggle to the point of production, is perhaps most famously articulated in Wages for Housework (WfH). The campaign took shape across the early '70s as a collaboration of women's groups across nations, sectors of work, and Marxist movements, which stressed the inseparable intersections of race, sex, and class in capitalist structures and class composition. As Anna Curcio notes, Wages for Housework was more than a simple demand but "an organizational tool and a call to struggle that aimed at recomposing the many faces of the struggle against women's exploitation and subordination."[38]

I will return to WfH below, but want to stress what co-founder Selma James termed the "organizational strategy of autonomy" sustaining the network, informed by her experiences in anti-racist and anti-imperialist movements. Developed in practice against the pervasive tensions of separatism, the autonomy of each group was prioritized to stop the more socially powerful from taking center stage and obscuring "the leadership that comes from grassroots experience," while attaining unity "by ensuring each sector visibly contributed its experience, tactics, and possibilities, thus refusing be dominated by others."[39] Seeking points of class commonality across shared technical composition reveals

distinct strategies in different political compositions, to grapple with the potentials and difficulties of cross-class alliance. In the ever-shifting compositional plane, the ascendency of neoliberalism also wrought the "feminization of labor," which refers not only to demographic shifts as more women entered workforces but also capital's reorientation in the organization and content of work, wherein the relations, affects and caring labors coded as "feminine" are put to work in employment formations that are undervalued, underpaid, and insecure.[40] Critiquing the post-Operaismo appropriation of "immaterial labor" in theorizing the post-Fordist shift to service and information—most famously associated with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri—as collapsing categories, the Precarias a la Deriva draw attention to the differential "social value" assigned to various labors labelled "immaterial," which "establishes a difference between giving a hand-job to a client and designing a web page."[41] In the atomized, fragmented, and digitally mediated landscape of platformization, an autonomist cultural studies attends to specific terrains of struggle wherein the making productive of informal labor, leisure, and self-expression produces points of aggregation across seemingly distinct spheres. Further, this perspective retains a critical focus on the differential power relations that shape the subjectivity of the software engineer, online sex worker, rideshare gig worker, or content-moderator.

The Incubator: Everywhere

Reflecting upon the inflated valuations of tech startups, software engineer, writer, and activist Wendy Liu refers to the "collective fantasy" that "the tech sector can absorb an infinite amount of surplus capital, that there will be enough successes to make up for all the failures" as compounding the reach of the private sector and enclosure of the digital commons: terms of success are dictated as huge (private) profit which places structural incentives on what—or who—gets funding.[42] Drawing from personal experience, Liu remarked it is "easy to see startups as an escape" from the monotony of the day job, but this individualistic

liberation not only papers over discrimination in the “meritocratic” tech world, it also occludes the years of struggle in the hope that you’ll make it—which you likely won’t.[43] Google’s in-house incubator launched in 2016 with a name that plays on overwork in the industry as well as startups as an escape, Area 120. The company’s famous “20% time” policy encourages workers to dedicate this percentage of the working week to side projects that could benefit the company, which the founders believe “empowers [employees] to be more creative and innovative.”[44] In reference to a joke that Googlers call it 120% time, an extra on top of the demanding workload, Area 120 is publicized as the inverse, working on 20% passions—as long as they are for Google—100% of the time. The chosen projects must leave their full-time position but are provided with the incubational needs to pursue their startup dreams. In the sweeping tech layoffs that began in 2022, Area 120 was hit hard, half of the projects dropped amid a hiring slowdown.[45] Easy escapes, it seems, are reserved for capital.

While platforms and Big Tech infiltrate public, private, work, and home life, and political actors struggle to contain their political and cultural power, what is being incubated when Silicon Valley is the midwife? In the final section of the paper, I turn toward the criminalized labor and communal expertise excluded from the cyber workplace: a hustle culture erasing the hustlers. But first, I focus on the incubator as part of the technical composition of class in the high-tech sector, both a physical worksite and symbol of the “innovation economy” where dreams of autonomy are tied to speculation and financialization, to tease out the hidden divisions coded between hard and software, material and immaterial, and across configurations of digital work: practices made visible in critique by tech worker mobilization.

Incubator Ideals: Place-Making for the Platform

The business incubator has weathered more than one interregnum, emerging as US deindustrialization gathered pace. The world's first incubator opened in New York state in 1959 when a farm machinery company shuttered up, leaving 2,000 workers without employment and an empty factory. The local family who bought the space couldn't find a single tenant, so divided the building to accommodate smaller, fledgling businesses and the Batavia Industrial Center was born. Tenants were offered a wide variety of services beyond the physical space, with a host of amenities that have come to define the concept, such as "short-term leases, shared office supplies and equipment, business advice, and secretarial services."[46] As for the name, so the legend goes, the center was housing overflow coops from a nearby hatchery and while guiding a local reporter on a tour the owner quipped, "these guys are incubating chickens, I guess we're incubating businesses."[47] This storied family enterprise is often held distinct from the contemporary image of high-tech startups aiming for disruption and the vaunted goal of scalability, as a project focused upon the resuscitation of a local town. Yet, incubators as part of a complex of investment in innovation—backed by an assemblage of actors including venture capitalists, universities, local to federal governments, NGOs, and, increasingly, corporations—often remain tied to promises of job creation, social mobility, and local (whether city, state, or regional) regeneration. These visions of social change however are, implicitly or explicitly, connected to Silicon Valley culture.[48]

A 1987 article on "Managing the Incubator System" notes the rapid growth of incubators across the late '70s and early '80s, at the close of the interregnum that saw the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony. A predominant strategy of incubation emerged, described as a conspicuous attempt to build companies, like Batavia, but with the eventual goal that from these controlled conditions,

businesses could then fly the (engineered) nest.[49] Bolstered by the concurrent rise of Silicon Valley and Boston's Route 128, and with policy makers concerned by declining US manufacturing and rising competition from Japanese firms, universities became a central site in promoting technological development, aided by policies such as the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act.[50] Universities now play a major role in the tech landscape, a 2016 study reporting a record high of 42% of US incubators associated with higher education institutions.[51] Autonomist scholar Gigi Roggero posed higher education as a "privileged observatory" from which to analyze the shifts in production toward knowledge, culture, and language "given their status as 'incubators of innovation.'"[52] I would add that with the expansion of incubators across academic institutions, providing debt-laden students with training and connections to the entrepreneurial craft, alongside the pervasive metaphor of incubation as value-creation, this provides another privileged formation to observe convergences across labor relations.

To take us to the current interregnum, 2009 saw a surge in incubators and accelerators worldwide according to consultancy firm Roland Berger, a trend that has continued at a growth rate of 5 times between 2009–2018.[53] Startups generally, and specifically tech startups, have a famously high failure rate and the incubator provides one possible aid in weathering the stormy seas. In an oft-quoted—though rather old and difficult to substantiate—statistic, NBIA's 2012 *State of the Business Incubation Industry* reported an 87% survival rate after five years for businesses who went through an incubator program.[54] Beyond curating a physical place with the infrastructural necessities to work, incubators offer programs catered to crafting the entrepreneur through business management skills training, networking, and mentorship.[55] As Sharon Zukin has argued, mentorship programs are a "deliberate strategy of intergenerational cultural reproduction" reinforced through proximity to other budding founders as well as access to potential investors, partners, clients, and business leaders: incubators form part of an assemblage circulating social, cultural, and economic capital.[56] These programs provide a pedagogical, relational, and financial route to find a

“place” within the social milieu, as well as the market, via a markedly middle-class habitus. Theorizing what she terms the “Planetary Silicon Valley” in the innovation complex of New York City, Zukin hits upon a “basic contradiction” between the material locale of tech ecosystems and the start-up ethos of “growth *unconstrained by geography*.”[57] This seeming transcendence of place through platforms, clouds, and codes, is sustained by real estate speculation, infrastructural investment, and a talent pool of available knowledge workers in concentrated places to host “innovation.” Beyond that, there are the obscured workforces who build the materials and perform micro-work, as well as the growing ranks of contractors across roles, from cafeteria workers to coders.

Design *imaginaires* of the “innovation landscape” offer insight into the role of place in forming the ideal “disrupter,” so long as this disruption keeps capital afloat and the concentration of profit in ever fewer hands.[58] Far from anywhere-work, the blurred boundaries of work/life and public/private are active considerations in the role of architecture and design to curate the incubation environment. Drawing on interviews from architects and “users,” a 2017 collaborative report between Brookings and the Project for Public Space reads the growth of “Innovation Spaces”—a complex including research institutions, incubators, accelerators, co-working sites, and startup hubs—as the “physical manifestations of broader economic, cultural and demographic forces, *elevating what matters in today’s economy*.”[59] Thus, the authors argue, a shift in design has followed place-making that nurtures the contemporary knowledge worker who demands comfort, sociality, and integration of technology. The flexibility of contemporary work is read into design which strikes a balance between privacy and collaboration.[60] Beyond workplaces to put pen to paper, fingers to keys, or stylus to smart board, the role of “public space” is given protracted attention in research on innovation space as well as architectural discourse.

What Surabhi Pancholi, Tan Yigitcanlar, and Mirko Guaralda refer to as the ideal “live-work-play-learn environment” is one where public space is utilized to create

a “sense of place,” a concept which a 2023 McKinsey report on building tech ecosystems also refers to in balancing infrastructural place-making for “live, work, and play” with redressing diversity “imbalances” through “inclusive growth.”[61] Incubators and the most privileged sectors of digital labor are pitched as maintaining “balance” where the contradictions in capital have eluded institutional containment. Ray Oldenburg’s concept of the “third place”—as distinct from home and work—has long been associated with catering to the needs of mobile and freelance knowledge workers, and the “Innovation Spaces” report situates this space directly in the fluid tech workplace. Noting that interview partners had described a relatively recent focus upon the role of public space, particular reference is made to the “reimagined ground floor” as an “interstitial space between public and private.”[62] Posed as “neutral ground,” the blurring of public/private in a workplace that blurs work/life not only renders *anywhere* as the entrepreneur’s workplace but speaks to the putting to work of public space as productive in attracting and stimulating innovation.

Who is imagined in this public-private-work-life environment? In an interview of “leading architects weighing in on the future of work,” LoriAnn Mass notes the movement toward the model of the “working lab or incubator” as “deepening the connection” between work and life, illustrated anecdotally through a client who resisted the shortening of the building café queue, as “it’s a place for democratic, productive exchange.”[63] Considering the reimagined (private) public, I am drawn once again to F-Architecture’s musings on the incubator, where the “same shitty dynamics of *feminization* and late capitalism are reproduced in the co-work of our dreams”: which leads me to ask, what of the baristas, cleaners, security, and other service staff tasked with upholding the third space milieu?[64] For whom is the ground neutral? The imagined “future of work” defined by transparency, opportunities to collaborate, and a sense of belonging further perpetuates feminization in cultivating emotional investment in the company as “family,” work rewarded by social recognition.[65] Incubators as a “physical manifestation” of “what matters in today’s economy” are part of a technical composition that

valorizes the entrepreneurial subject as the driving force of technological development, in competition for resources, whose startups go on to hire workers and restart the self-same cycle. Tech worker mobilizations have rallied against the interrelated separation of high-tech roles as *the* tech worker and their popular occlusion as workers at all, to exacerbate contradictions from the workplace to platform capitalism.

Tech Work Composition

The popular image of tech workers as predominantly young men who want to change the world while getting rich, playing ping-pong between meetings, and having care needs provided by the company is reproduced in the incubator "innovation" landscape. As Tech Workers Coalition (TWC) organizer Kristen Sheets argued, a major hurdle in organizing is the "conflation in popular media between the tech worker and the tech executive."[66] Within the constraints of this article—to highlight points of intervention for cultural studies in the "incubational moment"—I explore the growth of the tech labor movement to touch upon episodes, strategies, and organizations in the cycle of struggle. Barriers that are enforced socially, physically, and culturally to decompose solidarity are sources of antagonism across tech work; mobilization has focused upon building a cross-class *worker* subjectivity to assert collective power over the technologies that structure work and life.

An oft-noted challenge of tech labor politics is a notion of worker struggle tied exclusively to the wage. But as an engineer remarked following the establishment of Kickstarter United in 2020, there is a well of "untapped energy" as tech workers seem "particularly interested in the product of their labor and to the ethical considerations behind it."[67] The unionization campaign at Kickstarter was sparked by management's overruling of the Trust and Safety team, bending to criticism from far-right site *Breitbart* to cancel the campaign *Always Punch Nazis*—a comic

book whose title plays on the widely memeified moment when neo-Nazi and alt-right Trump supporter Richard Spencer was punched in the face—which spurred grievances over decision-making and equity in the workplace.[68] Trump's election, yet another morbid symptom, is widely recognised as catalyzing a broader movement from the ranks of salaried employees, particularly when a "Tech Summit" hosted by the incoming president made overtly clear that Big Tech was willing to use the fruits of their labor to be evil.[69] The Never Again Pledge—a reference to IBM's technological support to Nazi Germany in "optimizing" the Holocaust—published the day before the summit, was a declaration signed and circulated by tech employees pledging their refusal to partake in the "incoming administration's proposed data collection policies" in fear of mass deportations and the proposed "Muslim Registry."[70] When Google signed a contract with the Department of Defense in 2017 to develop "Project Maven," an AI tool to harness cloud computing and machine learning in drone footage analysis, the collective action in protest was described by one organizer as the Never Again Pledge in action.[71]

Dissent for Project Maven initially grew within the teams working on the secretive contract and, as workers researched the project on the company network while management dismissed concerns, changed focus to informing and mobilizing their fellow Googlers on the internal social network.[72] Resistance comprised a "patchwork of different efforts" with groups formed across the global company, including protest quits, research to document the project, direct confrontation of the issue at company meetings, and the flooding of their social network with anti-Maven memes.[73] A campaign leader highlighted the impact of organizing through the means and vernacular of the tech workplace, noting the traction of these memes became evident when Google leadership began "using them as one of their metrics for measuring internal chatter about the project."[74] Management attempted to assuage employees by claiming the relatively small $9 million contract was a one-off for non-offensive purposes, but revelations that Maven was a pilot project for future collaborations and a pitch for the cloud computing

JEDI project were followed by leaked internal emails that showed projections of up to $250 million in annual revenue.[75] As pressure grew, Google ultimately announced in June 2018 that it would not renew the contract. The months of unrest had made the capital-labor distinction visible across supposedly flat hierarchies and demonstrated the possibilities of collective agitation.

This militant energy and experience was put to practice in a series of actions addressing the interrelated ethics of their labor products and workplace. One of the seven core organizers of the global Google Walkouts on November 1st 2018, Meredith Whittaker, described the influence of Maven on the recent wave of "elite tech worker" actions as having "flushed the tech nervous system with the idea that organizing was a legitimate and useful means of checking these powerful companies."[76] The protest, sparked by a *The New York Times* article detailing support of executives accused of sexual misconduct, saw 20,000 workers leave their desks.[77] Swiftly assembled and "organized by mainly femmes and people in operational roles whose job is to organize shit all day anyway," as Whittaker noted, the action turned "their daily wage work skills against the company, using all this talent differently."[78] The open workplace culture at companies such as Google and Kickstarter, transparency and dialogue between employees and executives intended to inspire collective investment in the work, is part of the "disruption" logic which can be seen to have facilitated what Romano Alquati termed "invisible organization": the informal networks linking workers were used to strategize dissent and incite coordinated action which "inheres not outside capital or in flight from it but truly *within*."[79] Just as the networks at Google provided tools to organize seemingly spontaneous protest, the purportedly progressive workflow at Kickstarter meant communications across teams about major decisions was commonplace. When a team member took to Slack to inform colleagues about the top-down cancellation of the anti-fascist comic, the enraged response ultimately led management to reverse the decision but also restrict staff discussion and input, which organizer Clarissa Redwine described as setting the stage for unionization: "workers were beginning to see the intention behind

Kickstarter's power structure."[80] As capital reacts to worker political composition, the cycle of struggle shifts to new terrain.

The crackdown at Google after such high profile, and costly, collective action sought to temper the flames by removing prominent leaders and foreclosing the famed "radical transparency" such as in a company wide email warning employees that unauthorized access of "need to know" material could result in disciplinary action or termination.[81] The history of worker-led protests at Google, alongside the tightening grip of the corporation, inspired and informed Alphabet Workers Union (AWU), launched in January 2021 as part of the Communication Workers of America's (CWA) Coalition to Organize Digital Employees (CODE). A common feature of the recent tech movement has been a focus on education and expertise-sharing, since many are relatively inexperienced or new to organizing in a market with famously high turnover where lessons can be lost across a shifting workplace. Challenging the perception of tech as "unorganized" entails not only dispelling the notion that engineers are too privileged to organize but also creatively overcoming obstacles posed by US labor regulation in workplaces where huge workforces might be dispersed geographically and differentiated by status while networked across projects. Worker-led collectives and organizations in unconventional collaborations with "traditional" unions have positioned themselves as nodal points within a broader tech labor ecosystem. Kickstarter United, for example, searched for a partner willing to "get creative" in applying best practices to a new industry while ensuring "a lot of space for workers to lead," ultimately choosing the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) to become the first wall-to-wall NLRB-union at a US tech company.[82] OPEIU built on this success to launch the Tech Workers Union Local 1010, focused on providing institutional support to worker-led workplace organizing. Since "the tech industry is too vast to be organized by a couple staff organizers at a few of the major unions," the hallowed goal of scalability is detourned into building situated, networked units of collective power.[83] At a firm like Google, navigating vast scales within the workplace, the non-contract union

supported by CWA is described by Ben Tarnoff and Nataliya Nedzhvetskaya as an "experiment," stressing experimentation as necessary to create models that cannot be abstractly theorized but "must be worked out in practice, above all by the workers themselves," while acknowledging criticism from some Google organizers that CWA were "claiming turf" or sidelining more radical strains.[84] In analyzing cybernetic technologies in global class composition, Nick Dyer-Witheford concluded that "the inherent contradiction between the fast time of digital mobilization and the slow time of movement building will also have to be reckoned into organizing practice."[85] In the remainder of this section, I draw attention to the organizational forms seeking to bridge such spatial and temporal gaps, first looking to TWC.

Founded in 2014 as a collaboration between former cafeteria worker Rachel Melendez and software engineer Matt Schafer, a perspective on the commonalities of struggle across the tech workplace spectrum as well as the differential access to social power was central to TWC from the outset.[86] The spike in activism in tech offices had been preceded by unionization efforts across contracted services workers, and TWC initially focused on aiding campaigns, to tear down the "invisible walls between different kinds of workers" and garner support from more privileged workers at these sites.[87] A recent example of such collaboration took place in Germany as the largely migrant gig workforce of the delivery app Gorillas reached out to organizations including Berlin TWC during their agitation across a series of Wildcat strikes in 2021–2022. TWC's contribution to the effort is described by Valentin Niebler as: "first, passing on knowledge and resources," particularly in the intensive process of forming a workers council; "secondly shielding off risk" by participating in blockages, strikes, and labor courts; and "thirdly amplifying voices" in press interviews and across their "well-established networks" in Germany and beyond.[88] Building upon the founding focus on support to widen the remit of "tech worker" action, TWC recalibrated as a vehicle to generate worker-subjectivity in the "white-collar" ranks to identify

distinct positions in a shared struggle, which led the group to the autonomist tactic of workers' inquiry.

Within TWC, such inquiry was first organized in dedicated sessions with questionnaires, described as attending to the basics of organizing, to get coworkers talking, critiquing, and reflecting on one's place within structures to foster "mutual and collective agitation."[89] But reflecting on the series of successes across 2018, it shifted from a tool to what R.K. Upadhya called a "general mentality that needs to pervade all aspects of our organizing"; the inquiry mentality is illustrated as prioritizing group discussions centered on "connecting the topics to our actual lives and experiences" at events, as well as one-on-one conversations that fuel "more radical and democratic workers organizations"—held distinct from the sales pitch approach of "mainstream or conservative unions."[90] The grassroots coalition has expanded across the US and internationally, with local chapters led and defined by workers in their geographic context, and connected digitally over Slack and in collaborative training sessions on Zoom. Forging networks to stoke mobilizing energy across the industry is central to the alt-labor organization, which organizer Simone Robutti described in a 2023 interview as taking on "the role of an eco-systemic curator."[91] Reflecting on TWC as a launchpad, Robutti refers to a recent retrospective event which sought to hear from former members: "some of them went on to build very interesting stuff, like the Alphabet Workers Union. There, TWC fulfilled its purpose."[92]

AWU-CWA went public in January 2021 as a wall-to-wall, pre-majority union, open to all Alphabet workers in the US and Canada.[93] The interrelated structural forms navigate the distinct challenges of building sustainable institutions of worker power that allude traditional unions. Organizing wall-to-wall tackles the "two-tier" system, which separates the Temps, Vendors, and Contractors (TVCs)—who make up almost half of the workforce—from the employment protections and famed perks offered to Full-Time Employees (FTEs). Such infrastructural

divisions, increasingly common in the tech landscape to shirk responsibility, save costs, and stymie worker organizing, also further entrench structural inequalities across roles, as highlighted by AWU president Parul Koul who first joined Google as a software engineer on a one-year contract and began organizing as her concerns grew that fixed-term contracts "could be disproportionately offered to candidates from underrepresented communities."[94] The ongoing campaign "Every Google Worker" highlights interventions where divisive strategies can be hacked to build solidarity. A companion to the yearly feedback survey sent to FTEs only, AWU members used the internal on-corp email to reach out to "nearly 26,000 of the estimated 50,000 US based vendors" in an effort to make visible "Alphabet's US shadow workforce."[95]

The breadth of membership is enabled by their pre-majority status: a choice informed not only by the sheer scale and "densely networked structure" of the workplace—how to reach the 80,000 majority or divide them into meaningfully distinct units—but also particular security issues: "Google can monitor everything you say, which means you have to reorient your approach to be security safe with being public."[96] Contending with an employer who is also a behemoth of surveillance capitalism, the union leveraged the dynamics of the information economy, openly organizing to undercut Google's data power. Another timing consideration was the decompositional tech turnover: Organizers noted many people leave in early January due to the bonus payment schedule and hoped the announcement might convince some to stay for the struggle.[97] With 250 members at launch and roughly 1,400 at the time of writing, building AWU in public is pitched as meeting the task of creating a formal infrastructure to sustain worker energy head on. The investment in cultivating bottom-up organizing knowledge is also seen as a movement-building tactic embracing turnover. Since many current members will soon be at another company, former secretary Chris Schmidt noted "that gives us a way to diffuse the model we're developing throughout the broader industry."[98]

Circulating wider struggles in diffusing organizing experience has also seen a marked investment in worker-led forums to archive actions in the industry, share news, and exchange ideas. Analyzing food platform strikes, Jamie Woodcock and Callum Cant note the historical practice of producing bulletins and newspapers to document, inform, and proliferate struggles, literature defined by the "attempt to articulate the political 'leap' from the everyday confrontation and antagonism of capitalist production into a broader process of class struggle."[99] For example, *Collective Action in Tech* began as a project to create a publicly accessible archive of protest, driven by the "idea that tech workers—and not media or management—should define the tech workers movement."[100] The ambitions have grown with the movement, now pursuing multiple strategies to "strengthen the ecosystem," including the production of guides on common issues—such as "DMs Open" with practical tips for remote organizing—and the Embedded Organizers program.[101] Such aggregation sites are also platforms to reach workers in crisis, like in the brutal Musk Twitter takeover. A "Layoff Guide" produced "by Tweeps for Tweeps," distributed on *Collective Action* and overlapping channels in the ecosystem, detailed advice ranging from surveillance and data security to mutual care and establishing networks on encrypted services.[102] While the campus and the incubator encourage an entrepreneurial "disruptor" whose unfettered access is at the expense of other publics and other workers, antagonisms brewing in tech worker organizing are surely stoked by the uncertainties of the interregnum: by the seemingly limitless expansion of their employers across data publics, platforms, and urban space, and the use of their labor to do so, just as the chaos at Twitter underscored that even the most privileged workers are disposable. The potential terrains of conflict intersect across the workplace/campus, to the gentrified city, and the Internet, in struggles over the ethical values of tech.

Nowhere: Not Safe for Work

TWC has stressed the class compositional potential in forging alliances between the workers who build platforms and those whose labor is organized through platforms, usually couched in terms of supply chains, logistics, and the contemporary image of a gig worker (e.g. Uber drivers).[103] But platforms mediate work in many varied and non-linear ways beyond those whose gig is dictated by an app, including the content creators, artists, and other cultural workers whose labors are (at least partially) managed online in more fluid relations to the app(s). And what of sex workers, whose labor built and popularized platforms, who innovated ways to turn a profit but are now excluded from the "great leveler" of digitally afforded, informal income? Danielle Blunt of the Hacking//Hustling collective, at the intersection of tech and social justice, explained the name as reflecting the everyday practices of sex work, "both a hack of a system and the hustle of survival to expand the choices we have": hacking the nine-to-five and hustling not just for the next gig but to provide community care denied by the state.[104] What forms of solidarity, and visions of the future, are incubated when the foundation of expertise is expanded?

The relation of the Internet to the consumption of erotic content is often jokingly discussed in terms of the almost unlimited access to free porn; as the colloquial rule 34 of the Internet states, "if it exists, there is porn of it. No exceptions." The relation is much deeper, however. I now turn the focus to platform work as placed between hyper visibility and invisibility. Reflecting upon the study of digital place, as new technologies augment and layer the constitution and constitutive bounds of place, Cresswell refers to the algorithmic sorting of Google Maps search results as opaquely stratifying and hierarchizing attention. Much as "the landscape directs our attention in socially coded ways," ultimately "invisibility in software is reflected in invisibility in place."[105] Sex workers have long straddled this line, working to be visible enough to earn while evading surveillance and policing. The

enclosures in the decentralized online marketplace are posed by MacLeod as a "stark example of what can happen when the social mobility of a working class which had access to anarchic space is prohibited by the carceral state."[106] I must note, in reference to my use of the term "sex work," that this is a broad umbrella encompassing a variety of exchanges involving erotic labor, including prostitution, BDSM services, sugar babying, and camming. Not every individual involved in the sex trade identifies with this term, which intersects with distinct stigmas faced across the sector, referred to as a "whorearchy": I point to femi babylon's explication of the many power differentials reproduced in a discursive landscape that privileges whiteness, wealth, and respectability.[107] One must sit with the thorny questions of extraction in academic engagement with sex work, in drawing upon a vast and varied pool of knowledge and experience to produce research within an institutional sphere that continues to exclude the community; I use the imperfect term here to stress the labor and class claims of sex work as work—and often, also, antiwork.

Displacing Communal, Criminalized, Feminized Innovation

The claim that "sex workers built the internet" is more than a rhetorical rallying cry, but a reclamation and reinsertion of the work of feminized, criminalized, and ultimately communal labors to the historical record. As Livia Foldes—cofounder and creative director of the tech justice group Decoding Stigma—writes on her website bearing the title, this statement is an invitation to listen, learn, and support a community "most intimately familiar with the internet's contradictions, and who are doing transformational work to make it more just for everyone."[108] Sex workers must constantly innovate hacks in hostile conditions, but are a community consistently marginalized in—or violently excluded from—institutional labor and feminist movements.[109] Zahra Stardust, Gabriella Garcia, and Chibundo

Egwuatu note that sex work has provided material support for infrastructure, built audiences, and stimulated technical improvements in the provision of erotic content, pioneering profitability long before the mainstream, only to be shut out.[110]

Across the 1990s, it was not just media companies like Playboy or Hustler diversifying from print media who invested in internet technologies for erotic content, but individual sex workers who developed subscription sites and video streaming, works of creative disruption outside of the formal arrangements of capital. The women are described by Foldes as stressing the "independence and flexibility their self-owned platforms afforded them, citing benefits that would come to define the upsides of online work, decades before most workers experienced them."[111] The Internet offered the potential for a marginalized community to circumvent the carceral state, a tool for greater control of working conditions "to gain autonomy, financial security, and safety."[112] However, this is a community always acutely aware of the dangers in technological affordances that can be used to extend surveillance, theft, and censorship. The devaluation of sexual labor to the enrichment of (white, cis) male-coded tech culture, where companies such as MindGeek profit from "highly visible, mass-scale content piracy on porn aggregator sites," rests upon a history of stolen content and unpaid labor.[113] As a handful of companies have come to dominate the Internet agora, the supposed apolitical goal of providing a safe and clean digital public, aided by anti-sex work policy, facilitates digital gentrification. The historical casting of sex workers as "vectors of disease" is mapped onto the digital sphere, evoking another incubation metaphor, as reducing risk of infection. I begin from this recognition of past and present hacks and setbacks to center the possibilities of otherwise, and in this incubational moment to heed Garcia's words, "to Big Tech, the sex worker is as indispensable as they are disposable."[114]

As the growth of monopoly platforms structures the interface, social interactions, and money-making potentials online, creators of content are increasingly subject

to the whims of a workplace that wields the surveillance power and disciplinary action of an employer but with no accountability to the worker. Online sex workers, beyond being paid for an exchanged service—whether a scene, dance, sexual act, video, stream, etc.—must also perform labors of self-branding across social media, creating relations with consumers and producers, building diverse income streams, and maintaining channels of community vital in a hostile work-life place.[115] The cultural imperative to find fulfilment in work is discussed by Stardust in relation to discourses of "authenticity" in porn performance, as reifying the extractive devaluation of sex work specifically and gendered labors in general, since "the idea that anyone can build a career that is both income-generating and personally meaningful is a projection of privilege that ignores the fundamentally unequal division of labour."[116] The unequal labors—and rewards—are outlined by Brooke Erin Duffy, Annika Pinch, Shruti Sannon, and Megan Sawey in an ecological account of the "nested precarities" in aspirational, platformized creative work. On top of the fickle market and industry that has always marked cultural work, platforms themselves introduce further insecurities through features, algorithms, and community guidelines. The game of maintaining visibility demands producers cater not only to audiences but increasingly to platform companies, whose systems mediating engagement are largely invisible, but whose algorithmic and human moderation punishments map onto existing social inequalities, disproportionately impacting Black, LGBTQ+, ethnic minority, and women creators.[117] Sanitizing sex (work) from platforms extends across these intersections of exclusion. The term "deplatforming sex" was coined by Stephen Molldrem to describe Tumblr's 2018 porn purge, following the discovery of child pornography on the site and subsequent removal from the Apple App Store. A platform faced with deplatforming, one whose user-base and content largely surrounded the circulation of erotic and subcultural media, Tumblr took the step to ban all adult content, shutting sex and sex workers out from a mainstream platform and erasing vast archives of activism, education, self-expression, and bonds of solidarity built by marginalized communities.[118]

In a roundtable discussion on “Deplatforming Sex,” Danielle Blunt and Sinnamon Love both spoke to experiences of social and algorithmic stigma in being marked as a “sex worker” across moderated services—whether or not for the exchange of erotic content—such as loss of access to financial payment processors like Paypal, account deletion on AirBnB, shadowbans on social media, and in search results where sex worker researchers may have their academic output filtered out as 18+.[119] Moderation of platform ecologies sustained through user-generated content are often ascribed solely to algorithms, but this black box of curation through computation is also an act of distancing. The “hidden processes” of commercial content moderators described by Sarah Roberts “contribute to the notion of social media, and all its attendant parts, as immaterial and ethereal,” whereby the people doing the mentally-taxing, fast-paced, poorly-paid, and subcontracted work are as unseen as practices governing what content is unacceptable, thus invisible: the shadow workforces of Alphabet and beyond.[120] This opacity is perhaps most pronounced in shadowbanning, a form of censorship that users are not notified of, where one can continue to post content, but the account is hidden from other users. A particularly insidious practice of surveillance capitalism, the user still provides revenue to the platform while they are effectively erased. The nontransparency of the punishment and cross-platform denial leaves no recourse, and knowledge-sharing is crucial in the Sisyphean task of gaming a moderation system trained to exclude nudity and sexual content—which Caroline Are describes in an autoethnography of “automated powerlessness” as an “exclusion from public life” due to “leaving private companies in charge of public space” and a societal approach to safety that seeks to identify and prevent risk.[121]

The tag Not Safe for Work (NSFW) takes on a new meaning in a post-FOSTA-SESTA Internet, but this has always served as a signal communicating what is suitable for the workplace and what is not. Examining the ascription of risk in sexual labor and expression across digital media cultures, Susanna Paasonen, Kylie Jarrett, and Ben Light discuss the NSFW tag as both a warning and a lure,

which functions by “playfully drawing on and constructing divisions between the practices and spaces of labor and leisure, things considered professional and personal, public and private.”[122] Again, as these distinctions blur beyond recognition, the determinations of value, access, and acceptability—always distributed inequitably—are enforced in the margins and interstices of perceived transparent, open, public online space. The “safety” of NSFW is pitched as in reference to the viewer, but it is the sanctity of the workplace and accompanying script of “safe” behavior that is protected; the label demarcates a separation of sexual content as not to be consumed—or produced—at work. How can workplace safety be assured when workers themselves are deemed the risk? While in the innovation spaces of the incubator, all places become a potential workplace in the incubation of ideas and interactions, the same permeability renders no place for sex work.

Take Over the Platform

In the final section of this article, I point toward sex worker-led organizations, projects, and events which confront policed barriers both on- and offline to highlight recompositional practices as the cycles of struggle shift to encompass the platform. What points of aggregation become visible from the ambivalent everywhere/nowhere of sex (anti)work? The Hacking//Hustling collective define themselves as struggling against violence facilitated through technology to “flip the script and center people in the sex trades as producers of knowledge and expertise in the movement to create safety for our communities without policing.”[123] For instance, the Dis/Organizing toolkit produced by the collective, drawn from research conducted between February and July 2021 with “migrant worker and sex worker-led political formations” as well as “shared learning sessions that bring together cumulative knowledge and experiences,” exemplifies Hacking//Hustling’s practice of elevating sex worker expertise while facilitating the distribution of harm reduction tools, mutual aid, and training to the community.[124]

Offering organizing strategies to “build collectives outside institutions,” the toolkit is inspired by the incarcerated prison abolitionist Stevie Wilson, who wrote: “my goal has always been to disorganize the prison, to make it less effective, to deny it what it needs to continue: people, money, and an uninformed and misinformed public.”[125] To disorganize, then, is to disrupt the institutions and infrastructures that divide workers for capital’s end, while also remaining vigilant to safeguard against efforts to diffuse autonomy through accommodation. Recognizing that workers “pushed into informal economies” often create their own informal systems, the toolkit addresses a range of subjects, from managing difference in movement spaces, to tax compliance, to what tech tools have been integrated—and how—into organizing practice, drawn from research in collaboration with other collectives as well as one-on-one interviews with organizers and group sessions.[126] Refusing places of perceived legibility or legitimacy, the toolkit outlines recompositional strategies in the maintenance of sustainable, inclusive places of mutual support that attend to oppressions across race, class, and gender as well as the differential risks faced across practices under “sex work.”

Participatory, peer-led, action research is a central facet of Hacking//Hustling to center sex worker experience and knowledge that does not present a monolithic account. The report *Erased* traces the impact of FOSTA-SESTA on two groups of sex workers, online and street-based workers. An important factor obscured by the muddied waters of moralized concern around coercion are barriers to other forms of labor: The surveyed responses from online sex workers referred to many difficulties such as managing illness and disability, single-parenthood, or full-time enrolment, as well as systemic hurdles like criminal records or lack of formal education. The authors note that for many, sex work as a preferable option “reflected a need for flexibility and an inability or discomfort around sacrificing large amounts of their time for substandard wages.”[127] The worker autonomy that sex work can afford is consistently threatened by whorephobic landscapes of criminalization and stigma that further economic and social precarity. The morals of consent do not extend to the material means to survive, never mind thrive.

Recognising the work of sex work is not to seek respectability but, as Stardust has argued, "many of the key tenets of the sex worker movements are based not upon the celebration of work, but upon practical tactics for maximising autonomy in relation to it."[128] Class politics that center sex workers demand a political vision that would uncouple worth from status within the wage-relation.

The negation of sex work as work—whether posed as uniquely exploitative, as undermining the dignity of work, or by reference to illegality—fundamentally constrains the imaginal composition of antiwork: if worth is tethered to work, how can there be liberation beyond employment? In an interview with Berg, babylon discusses their assertion of sex work as antiwork to make more explicit the fundamental struggle as that against capitalism. Describing their experience of erotic labor as "quasi work" since "real work didn't seem to have space for me, or it wanted me to come to work on call or endure racist customers for very little pay and flexibility," babylon holds open the tensions of work/antiwork in seeking to exercise as much freedom as possible through cyclical poverty in a classist, racist, and sexist system. Yet they still find, "my refusal to work while still kind of working is very upsetting to a lot of folks."[129] Juno Mac and Molly Smith invoke WfH in *Revolting Prostitutes* to foreground the articulation of refusal: "naming otherwise invisible or 'natural' structures of gendered labor is central to thinking about how, collectively, to resist or reorder such work."[130]

In an account of the 12-day Occupation of a London church in 1982 by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP)—"Hookers in the House of the Lord"—WfH co-founder and invited ECP spokeswoman Selma James underlined the recomposition of an anti-racist, anti-sexist feminist subjectivity across waged and unwaged workers: "In making a case against any woman being criminalized for refusing poverty, and in protecting her rights when she is, the Occupation was a moment of power for all women."[131] Framing the action as presenting a fundamental choice between prostitutes and police in a conflict wrought by the State confronts the stigma which encourages women and workers to seek

validation in contrast to the victim/criminal whore, siloing off sex work as a special issue. James stresses the strengths of ECP within the international WfH network and local King's Cross Women's Centre hub, a movement which prioritized autonomy while breaking down separatism across groups, "building networks with other women but keeping tight reins on your own struggle."[132] When an ECP initiative, the Legal Action for Women service, was established at the Women's Centre and police ramped up force targeting the "girls union," they were joined by Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women Against Rape in the Occupation, inspired by the French Collective of Prostitutes-led church occupations of 1975. The "shield" of respectable women's groups was complemented by the use of black masks to ensure anonymity. With arrest rates down during the Occupation, cognizant of looming backlash without media glare, the women refocused their demands on appointing a monitor and meeting with police, MPs, and council services.[133] While they won, James's account also appended a warning on the dangers of feminist careerism.

The report produced by their appointed monitor contained no mention of the Occupation, nor comparative arrest figures to build a case for discrimination, while multiple actors worked to separate prostitutes from the rest of the local residents. When calls from the Camden Women's Committee came, supported by feminist lawyers and antiporn lobbyists, to close Legal Action for Women so they could create a new one—claiming that non-prostitute women would not use a service publicly used (not to mention conceived) by prostitutes—the insidious threat of careerism was laid bare: "What we are witnessing before our very eyes is the process whereby women's struggle is hidden from history and transformed into an industry, jobs for the girls."[134] WfH celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2022, having also coordinated the Global Women's Strike since 2000 across the autonomous organizations, but silent erasures of sex workers from the mainstream women's movement underline the ongoing struggles against separatism and careerist fantasies of liberation.[135] Days before the Women's March on Washington in 2017, after Trump's inauguration, the "unity principles"

guiding the protest were quietly changed from the clear inclusive assertion “we stand in solidarity with sex workers’ right movements” to the coercion-focused and savior-coded “all those exploited by sex and labor.” The outcry on social media prompted a reversal but no public comment, however author and trans activist Janet Mock, the demonstration’s “policy table” member who had authored the original statement continued to speak out. In a Tumblr post she expressed the hope that “every sex worker who has felt shamed by this momentary erasure shows up to their local March and holds the collective accountable to our vast, diverse, complicated realities”; then used her platform at the demonstration, speaking “unapologetically” as “a trans woman-writer-activist-revolutionary of color,” to advocate for the difficult work of building an intersectional, inclusive movement.[136] Confronting reactionary forces in feminism, the choice remained and remains: stand with sex workers or stand with policing powers, both on and offline.

Performing a digital (de)occupation, the sex worker art collective Veil Machine addressed the material consequences and sanitizing spatial strategies of a gentrifying Internet in the virtual arthouse/whore gallery event E-Viction, which lasted for 12 hours on August 21st 2020, self-destructing as the clock struck midnight. Grappling with pandemic-induced restrictions and faced with a digital marketplace that outlawed their labors, E-viction was described as creating a community of resistance: “by engaging on a platform that violates SESTA-FOSTA, visitors and performers alike will engage in a new form of civil disobedience.”[137] Hosting live art and sex performances on a platform built by the collective with a shop and tipping facilities alongside fundraising efforts to pay performers, this protest was also an act of mutual aid and resource distribution in a period of devastating precarity. The platform design replicated a victim of FOSTA-SESTA, the personals section of Craigslist, a nod to the many lost places. In an interview Empress Wu described the interface as deliberately intended to capture the charged frictions of the early 2000s Internet, “when the Internet still seemed like

a wild frontier, without any boundaries or restrictions."[138] The palimpsest of past, present, and future were layered in this protest platform.

As one of many evictions, vice raids, and displacements, E-Viction plays with the ephemerality of the sense of place for sex workers. Seizing the means of destruction, the event celebrated the creative practices of community building to make place in a hostile environment. In an interview, Thea Luce noted the inception of the idea as realizing the similarities between evictions from physical public spaces and those online: "we wanted to take that fear of being shut down into our own hands, dramatize it to turn it into art, and transform it into something that belonged to us."[139] The event critiqued rigid distinctions of coercion and consent informing common-sense approaches to "safety" which function to devalue and deny the labor of sex and the agency of sex workers. As Ana Valens poetically described, the central idea that "sex workers agree to deplatform and censor themselves en masse as a sort of consensual, nonconsent role-play" is both a performance piece on online sex work and an invitation to build sex worker community in the face of digital gentrification.[140] Calling the event a "digital riot," Garcia argues that "designing this project with definitions of eviction and gentrification also pushed the collective to approach the project as spatial planners," in creating an immersive site of discovery that refuses the invisibility of "cleansing" to direct the gaze toward the interstices, alleyways, and backpages.[141] Safety pedaled as an apolitical goal cloaks the financial motivations and violent practices of data extraction and policing on platforms, but in creating a literal site of aggregation Veil Machine force reflection on the invisibilizing of "sanitation" through a celebration of the pleasures of community, support, and solidarity in shared struggle.

As actors vie over hegemonic power in the interregnum, and particularly over the content and money-making relations hosted and governed by platforms, a question that captures past erasures and alternatives, present experience, and future potentials is posed by Decoding Stigma: What would the Internet look like if

it were designed by sex workers? The “cross-institutional coalition of laborers, futurists, advocates, artists, designers, technologists, teachers, and students” focuses upon the liberatory futures possible through tech when ethics in design and research center sexual autonomy.[142] A project helmed by Garcia and Foldes, both of whom are members of the coalition, was recently supported for six months at a cultural incubator in San Francisco, which enabled a sex worker-led design facilitated through a series of workshops hosting space and holding place for those so-often spoken about or over. “Browser Histories” spawned from an event on the history of sex work and technology where participants shared personal “keepsakes” to illustrate positive experiences of technology inspiring “feelings of safety, creativity and community in their individual experiences as sex workers” in a forum not recorded or documented, rather “defined by its ephemeral nature in order to replicate the interstitial space in which the sex worker feels most at home.”[143] Experiencing stigma, exclusion, and violence from so many quarters, where their boundaries are so often crossed that ensuring safety and inclusion is a difficult balancing act, the relationality and fluidity of place is made apparent in the figure of the sex worker.

This event stoked a will to create a more permanent platform to archive the innovation, endurance, and communal endeavors of feminized labor to challenge capital’s narration of tech innovation. The project follows the militant research practices of Decoding Stigma to “reallocate institutional resources (in terms of both money and/or merit) in order to make sure that sex workers are invited, cited, and paid for establishing and supporting knowledge-creation,” thus the incubation provided material means for distribution as well as collective space “established around imagination and play” from which to realize the “freedom to fucking dream.”[144] Not at the service of capital, the innovation space of incubation is repurposed for imagination. The project in development is conceived as a collaborative platform, a “digital commons” that functions both as an archive but also in re-placing, or as Garcia writes “usurping the space” of the archive “to platform stories that are silenced or erased in order to uphold the status quo.”[145]

Reflecting upon the incubation period and the future of their project in an interview with the host C/Change R&D Lab, Foldes and Garcia position it as an ovule from which alliances, resources, and ideas can sprout and spread with material and social support. Imagining one possible future, they see themselves established as "an incubator-style think tank pushing projects into myriad disciplines globally" to elevate "sex worker genius" and "help usher in an era of extraordinary empathy, body autonomy, and ecosexual care."[146] Could this be the work/life place of dreams?

Conclusion: Organizing Dreams

Writing on the crisis (within the interregnum) of the pandemic, as calls to reimagine the "future of work" abound, Zukin underscores the need to question whose vision of the future workplace, city, and society are considered, and in whose interest?[147] Big Tech platforms profited massively in the pandemic, facilitating privatized data infrastructures as well as contactless conveniences supplied by the chains of "essential workers" to those locked down. As mass layoffs sweep the tech industry, impacting both full-time and contract workers, a potential decomposition looms.[148] A "startup surge" has been reported in tech-centric news media, articles citing a Clarify Capital survey of 1,000 laid-off tech workers that found 63% had started their own company and increased their salary.[149] But this stark display of the antagonistic relation between employer and worker also harbors recompositional opportunities. For instance, across a unionization campaign and strike, subcontracted workers at YouTube Music Content operations won potentially far-reaching protections for the industry. When a return-to-office order was issued in February 2023, the AWU argued this was retaliation against the team filing for union recognition. Garnering support for a subcontracted workforce, paid well below the average but expected to bear the costs of working onsite at Google Austin offices, the contractors began their first strike at Google, which included a Valentine's day performance of a joint employer

wedding.[150] While the majority had been hired remotely, many living out of state or sustaining multiple jobs to support living in a pricey city, the workplace was wielded as a disciplinary measure. In March, an NLRB ruling recognised Alphabet as joint employer alongside the subcontractor—thus both accountable—and in April the union was recognised as part of AWU.[151] In February 2024, a year after strike action began, unionized workers learned they had been terminated while testifying to Austin City Council on a resolution calling for Google to negotiate.[152] The work of horizontal organizing across tech, in the face of decompositional tactics such as stonewalling, subcontracting, and layoffs despite massive profits, is ongoing, and researchers of contemporary class must attend to the distinct mobilization formations challenging Big Tech from within.

The enclosures of cyberspace also threaten to spread further as the EARN IT act has been introduced into US Congress for a third time. The Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies Act is again pitched in moral tones as targeting the online spread of child sexual abuse material. The act would further erode Section 230 by extending platform liability for content produced by users, even when the information is encrypted. Encryption is a means of providing secure, private communication and the bill has been decried by workers' rights, digital privacy, human rights, and social justice organizations at each reading, in 2020, 2022, and 2023. In a letter to Congress opposing the bill, the ACLU outlines three broad dangers to civil liberties: incentivizing platforms to "monitor and censor their users' speech"; disincentivizing encryption all together, thereby "exposing the public to abusive commercial and government surveillance practices"; and the expansion of "warrantless government access to private data."[153] At a moment when bodily autonomy is under threat with the rollback of Roe v. Wade and a record amount of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation introduced, including anti-Drag laws, restrictions on gender-affirming surgery, and limits on curricula, the lessons of SESTA-FOSTA must be learned and heeded.[154]

To end on such downbeat tones is not to succumb to pessimism as inevitable, but a return to Gramsci in imploring a Left inquiry informed by "pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will."[155] The morbid symptoms of the interregnum further exclude sex workers, where waning hegemonic control prompts extending surveillance, stigma, and criminalizing of marginalized groups. The antiwork perspective of the network Other Weapons, who seek "life outside of any given parameters," call for the centering of community-based strategies of care and solidarity, skills that sex workers have long practiced, in a recognition that capital will never accommodate autonomy and liberation.[156] Cultural studies in the interregnum must understand in order to co-create strategies of autonomy from communities well-versed in organizing against the state, as Other Weapons call to mind Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's concept of "Planning" based in informal relations of social reproduction, as "the ceaseless experiment with the futurial presence of the forms of life that make such activities possible."[157] This paper was initially conceived in response to a *Lateral* call for papers on "theorizing (in) the interregnum" inviting reflection on the shifting sands and power differentials of the Gramscian invocation, which was made in a time of mainstream Marxist determination while fascism loomed.[158] The Angry Workers of the World have spoken of the structural limits that haunt academic research, where "the problem is the detachment of revolutionary (or at least combative) theory from everyday working-class struggles, which academia reproduces."[159] This article draws on autonomist tenets in articulating class composition in process, but as a largely theoretical endeavor charting threads across two sectors of digital labor—online sex work and tech work—it is somewhat limited by my own professional position, as a precarious "early career" scholar at the early stage of a new research project. The time and resources afforded to urgent, collaborative, participatory research is a struggle to which academia must also be organized. The classed barriers that I can speak to, entering the academy from a working-class background, relate not only to what knowledge, methods, and interlocutors are legitimate, but also the

necessary financial, social, and cultural capital to weather precarity, obscured in the maxim "publish or perish."[160]

The Midnight Notes Collective wrote of "new enclosures" in 1990 and critiqued Marx's analysis of enclosure as a movement toward a universal consciousness: "universal or not, real, living proletarians (that do not live on air) must put their feet some place, must strike from some place, must rest some place, must retreat some place."[161] Speaking in a 2020 interview about Vladimir Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* and the continued relevance of autonomist inquiry, Roggero urged greater emphasis on dreaming: "Just as then, so today, we need to rediscover our ability to dream and to give organized form to that dream."[162] As enclosures across physical and digital public space are pitched around the wonders and dangers of tech, the fostering of innovation or shoring up of safety, militant research can aid in dispelling the everywhere/nowhere work in service of capital and in this incubational moment, to provide a place for the freedom to fucking dream.

Notes

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Author Information

Sarah Earnshaw

Sarah Earnshaw is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the DFG project Practicing Place at KU Eichstätt-Ingolstadt working in American and Cultural Studies. She received her PhD in American Cultural History at LMU Munich, which is the basis for her forthcoming book, *Human Rights and Sovereign Standards in US Security: "Freedom Will Be Defended"* (Routledge, 2025), and was a postdoc fellow at the University of California, Berkeley where she was a union steward of UAW 5810. Having entered academia at the University of Glasgow as a first-generation student from a working class background, her ongoing research project on the spatial composition of class struggle - "Knowing Your Place" - reflects her interests in conceptions of freedom and autonomy, labor mobilization, and cultural theory as a tool for resistance.

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